



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Women's Political Participation — Electoral Trends

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This is the first In Brief of a series of eight developed as background papers for a three-day workshop titled 'Improving women's electoral chances through an evidence-based approach', hosted by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the Australian National University in Canberra, June 2016. The In Briefs are designed to accompany the [workshop synthesis report](#).

Women's political representation remains low at the national level in the Pacific islands region. Overall there are just 30 (6.1 per cent) female parliamentarians in the region, well below the global average of 23 per cent, and two Pacific states — the Federated States of Micronesia and Vanuatu — have no women members of parliament (MPs). Including non-sovereign territories, the level of women's representation rises to 13.5 per cent, an increase due in large part to the high numbers of women in the French Polynesian Assembly and the New Caledonian Congress, which combined account for over half of the region's female legislators. This briefing note takes stock of women's political participation in recent elections in the region, and identifies trends in the electoral performance of female candidates.

Women's Representation Is Increasing, but Very Slowly

Women's representation in the Pacific islands region is increasing at a far lower rate than other regions. From 2006 to 2016, women's national-level political representation in the Pacific went from 3.8 per cent to 5.6 per cent. Over the same period, women's representation increased more rapidly in other parts of the world: in Arab states it rose from 8.2 per cent to 18.4 per cent, in sub-Saharan Africa from 16.7 per cent to 23.3 per cent, and in the Americas from 20.6 per cent to 27.4 per cent.¹

Fewer Women than Men Stand as Candidates

Women are under-represented in elections as candidates. In the nine national-level elections held in the region between September 2014 and March 2016, nine out of ten candidates were men. No women stood in the 2015 Federated States of Micronesia election, where there has never been a female national-level representative. The highest proportion of female candidates was in Fiji in 2014 when 18 per cent of candidates were women. Only 14 per cent of female candidates in these elections were successful, compared to 22 per cent of men.

The Proportion of High-Performing Female Candidates Varies

The proportion of high-performing female candidates — those who can demonstrate a solid voting bloc, even if they are ultimately unsuccessful — varies between countries. In the 2014 Solomon Islands election and the 2014 Tongan election, for example, fewer than 20 per cent of female candidates won more than 10 per cent of the vote; in the 2016 Vanuatu election just one out of the 10 female candidates contesting did. In the 2016 Samoan election, however, over half of the female candidates contesting won more than 10 per cent of the vote.

Experience Contesting Elections Can Help

For many electoral candidates in the Pacific islands region, getting elected to parliament is a long-term goal; there are many examples of successful male candidates who have run in several elections before winning. There are also several female politicians who have won after numerous attempts. Julie Soso, the governor of Eastern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, unsuccessfully contested three national elections before winning in 2012. The delegate for American Samoa in the United States House of Representatives, Amata Coleman Radewagan, contested 10 congressional elections prior to her win in 2014. There is, however, usually a majority of first-time candidates contesting elections. In the

2014 Solomon Islands election, only 6 out of the 26 female candidates had contested a national election before; in the 2016 Vanuatu election, only 2 out of 10 had.

Incumbency Matters

While there is high turnover in many parts of the Pacific region in each election, incumbency can be an advantage. Of the seven women who entered Pacific parliaments after elections in 2015, three were incumbents, while another had previous parliamentary experience. In the 2016 Samoan election, despite an unusually high turnover rate of 54 per cent, all three incumbent female MPs retained their positions. Since most incumbents in the Pacific are men, decreasing turnover rates in areas of the Pacific like Solomon Islands — where turnover has been around 50 per cent on average since independence, but dropped to 28 per cent in 2014 — could constitute a further barrier for aspiring female candidates.

Women Tend to Align with Parties

Several Pacific islands countries, notably Fiji and New Caledonia, have relatively strong political parties; others, however, have weak and fragmented party systems with large numbers of independent MPs, while some Pacific legislatures have no parties represented at all. In many parts of the region candidate preselection processes within political parties do not exist. While there are no formalised party selection processes, party affiliation can still potentially benefit a candidate through connection with a popular public figure in the party leader, or through some financial support, albeit usually very limited and often gendered in that prominent male candidates will receive more than women. Many female candidates choose to align with parties; almost 70 per cent of women who ran in Solomon Islands in 2014 were party endorsed, and almost 90 per cent of female candidates in Samoa in 2016 were party endorsed or affiliated. In countries with strong party systems, it is difficult for women to enter politics working outside formal party structures. In the 2014 Fijian election, Roshika Deo ran as an independent candidate, but the party-based threshold for parliamentary representation meant that she did not enter parliament even though she won more individual votes than nine current parliamentarians for the ruling Fiji First party, including three women.

Subnational Linkages

The local level is where women's political leadership in the Pacific is most visible. Yet despite some notable exceptions (Meleisea et al. 2015), there is limited information on women's political participation at subnational levels, especially

in comparison to national-level data. Women's political participation at provincial and local levels of government is often framed as a potential platform for further political advancement, or a 'pipeline to parliament'. There is limited evidence that this has been the case in the Pacific region. What research has found, however, is that at least in Papua New Guinea the pipeline may work in the opposite direction; participation in national-level elections could be a pathway to political roles at the provincial or local level. A number of high-performing unsuccessful female candidates in the 2012 national election were appointed to positions in provincial assemblies following the election (Zubrinich 2016).

Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. Data at June 2006 and April 2016. 2006 Pacific data from Fraenkel 2006; other regions and 2016 Pacific data from [Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in Politics database](#).

References

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